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Editor's introduction
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"Inching toward some kind of humanity": an overview of contemporary South African poetry

Twenty-three years after the first democratic elections, what are contemporary South African poets writing about? How are they responding (both in terms of what they are saying and how they are saying it) to the shifting dynamics of national and personal identities, and to the crises of inequality and difference that persist, and have even enlarged, in a country that had proclaimed itself in 1994 to be made new?

In this brief overview I would like to introduce a selection of South African poets from the last five years. Some of these poets are what can loosely be termed established. They have been anthologized locally and abroad and widely translated. Others are new, younger voices; with perhaps a single collection to their name or none at all (it is not about quantity – one of my favourite poets at the moment is Max Ritvo, who died aged 26 and had only published one collection), some have substantial followings on social media for their live performances.

However, more than simply showcasing these poets, I would like to use their work to stimulate a reflection on poetry and its relationship to a "history told in scars" (Mphutlane wa Bofelo). I would like the reader to reflect upon the aesthetic commonalities between these writers, the complex linguistic and formal nuances that distinguish their work, and the range of impulses that shift them from the comfort (naivety?) of fixed positions and send them "inching toward some kind of humanity", as Lesego Rampolokeng describes in his interview with Robert Berold and Stacy Hardy.

But to begin, it is important that we return to that moment in April 1994 when South Africa celebrated its freedom after its first fully democratic election, and that we ask – as the poets here are insisting we do – quoting Langston Hughes: "What happens to a dream deferred?"

In his long prose-poem, 'Burial of the Poems', Mxolisi Nyezwa writes: "We could not trust what the rainbow said to us." Nyezwa here, of course, is referring to the unity of multi-culturalism and reconciliation heralded in Archbishop Tutu's ideal of the 'rainbow nation'. But Nyezwa points out the bitter failure of 'rainbowism' – as do other poets here, in differing ways, see Angifi Dladla, Allan Kolski Horwitz, Mandi Poefficient Vundla, Kelwyn Sole – and the sense of betrayal and frustration in their work is tangible. To quote Rampolokeng again from that same interview: "We find ourselves in a very dishonoured and disordered situation right now, where not a lot makes sense."

But to emphasise this reaction only would be to misrepresent the depth of the different poetic responses. In her poem 'The Sky Agrees', Makhosazana Xaba writes:

> They have changed the *new* we thought we had created
> Even the sky agrees that the beautiful ones have arrived.

Xaba here references the title of Ayi Kwei Armah's 1968 novel *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. While for Armah, beset by the corruption of post-independence Ghana (what he terms "the rot which imprisons everything"), there is despair and pessimism, Xaba posits the opposite. "They [the beautiful ones] study while sitting-in; tweet, post, broadcast the revolution." Significantly, they are

marked by the characteristics of youth culture, and by the markers of the fallist generation that has recently risen to prominence (#FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall, etc). For "the beautiful ones" do not just protest and condemn, they actively re-make the "*new*" (the post-1994 dream of the New South Africa), which the previous generation had assumed was real, but has now been shown to have been presumptuous.

Issues of corruption and the failure of service delivery to black communities feature strongly in the poems collected here, as do immigration and xenophobia, and the 2012 Marikana massacre at Lonmin mine, and the recent student protests for transformation not just of higher education but over land and restitution.

So if the pressure from socio-political imperatives is still prevalent in contemporary South African poetics, an important question to ask is: How have these imperatives changed from the revolutionary impulses in some of the earlier writers from the seventies and eighties?

What has happened to the erstwhile dichotomy between an art-for-art's-sake formalist approach to the function of literature and one that stressed context and social conditions and the necessity for literature to play a part in the struggle, and not be apart from it? (I am summarising here a complex debate that raged in the seventies and eighties – and drawing for my summary on Kelwyn Sole's compelling article in *Wasafiri 86, Summer 2016*, 'The Endless Deferral of Value'.)

South African commentators and writers like Lewis Nkosi, Njabulo Ndebele and Jeremy Cronin had long resisted the either-or terms set out above, and instead called for a non-instrumental view of the function of literature, one that did not turn its back on historical context but at the same time was not trapped in what Graham Pechey, in his introduction to Ndebele's 1994 collection of essays, *The Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, calls "the hyperbolic gestures of protest" (pg4). This enlarging of the language, scope and stylistics of literature is evident in the poems collected here in this small sample.

As a practising writer myself, and a teacher and editor, it is at the rough and robust intersection of the socio-political and the aesthetic, of the public and the private, that I find much of the poetry represented here drawing its indisputable energy. Not in a direct, mechanical way, but through increasingly nuanced, fluid and combinatory responses. Thus a young poet like Koleka Putuma can ask:

> Isn't it funny
> that when they ask about black childhood
> all they are interested in is our pain,
> as if the joy-parts were accidental?

As Kelwyn Sole notes in his article referred to above, there are now "multiplex manifestations of poetic expression in the country" (pg29). And he goes on to describe the "medley of influences" that can be mined in these poems.

Selecting these poems I was immediately struck by the deliberate preoccupation with form and the willingness to consider the materiality of the poem, not distinct from its so-called message. In this way conventional traits of poetry such as linearity, coherence and a stable voice are overthrown in favour of rupture, juxtaposition, and hybrid forms. Look at some of the following: Diana Bloem, Francine Simon, Gerard Rudolf, Joan Metelerkamp, Lesego Rampolokeng, Mxolisi Nyezwa, Caitlin Montgomery, Mangaliso Buzani, Sindiswa Busuku and Vangile Gantsho to see how this new inter-genre, combinatory approach is dismantling received poetic ideas and social positions.

It is intriguing to note how many of these poets whose work displays a conscious attention to formal innovation are connected to institutions of higher learning and to the creative writing courses taught there (whether as teachers or students). I make this observation not in any definitive or reductive way, and it is certainly an argument that would need greater scrutiny; I am simply trying to trace a possible influence.

Another influence, of course, and one which like the growth of accredited writing programmes is certainly not confined to this country, is Spoken Word poetry. In her review of the recent collection of Spoken Word poetry, *Home is Where the Mic is* (edited by Mandi Poefficient Vundla and Allan Kolski Horwitz), Anique Kruger writes:

> Small independent publishers may bemoan the decline of an active South African poetry readership, yet the spoken word is thriving on both physical and virtual platforms. The urban realm of poetry slams and open mic sessions has provided an alternative channel for a new generation of South African wordsmiths to make their voices heard. (*Wasafiri* 2016: 89)

There might be some grounds for hoping that a timid pushback in local poetry readership is taking place, as borne out by the rise of the new small poetry press, uHlanga (given how many new collections either have or are soon to be brought out by them), and the dogged survival and growth of others like Botsotso and Modjaji, but it is indisputable that an oral, performative style is prevalent and popular in many urban centres. While this has sometimes given rise to what Ingrid de Kok in her article 'Whole Words, Whole Worlds' in *Wasafiri 86* has called "writing within predictable fixed positions and in clichéd language, with occasional feel-good Oprah-like flourishes" (pg6), an examination of the poets collected here who are influenced by performative rhythms and phrasing like Vangile Gantsho, Mandi Vundla, Napo Masheane, Phillippa Yaa de Villiers, Mak Manaka, Lesego Rampolokeng, Koleka Putuma, Mphutlane wa Bofelo and Toni Stuart soon reveals the degree to which these poets are invigorating rather than diminishing contemporary poetic forms and expression. I am particularly intrigued by how poets like the ones mentioned interfuse in their work formal and linguistic innovation with the sharply observed quotidian:

the day you left
the trees wept all their leaves
in a week, the grass grew pale
my chest turned into a starless sky
i refused to cry for you
not a single tear

i had been gone long before

the winter came
you could not bring yourself to believe it
all your tears, turned green
flowers by your riverbank

(Gantsho: 'The Day You Left')

Together with the ascendancy of Spoken Word poetry, we must also note the persistence in this selection of the long poem format. The long poem has an extensive and rich tradition in southern African literature, from traditional oral poems to pseudo-Romantic epics like Herbert Dhlomo's early twentieth century 'Valley of a Thousand Hills' and later Black Consciousness-inspired book-length poems, *Africa, My Beginning* by Ingoapele Madingoane and Mongane Serote's *No Baby Must Weep*. In the hands of contemporary poets the narrative impetus is maintained in its linear trajectory by some (see Vonani Bila's account of the attempt on his life in the extract from 'They Came to Kill Me'), but also fragmented and treated more like collage in the prose-like extracts from Mxolisi Nyezwa's 'Burial of the Poems' and Mangaliso Buzani's 'a naked bone'.

But at the heart of these "multiplex manifestations of poetic expression" is, I have come to understand, a passionate commitment to poetry as a way of finding out, of discovering and making new. As Nyezwa writes: "All my poems ask questions … Poetry is a way toward somewhere." Where? I dare to ask. "A possible world," Rampolokeng responds in his interview.

The selection shown here represents work from the past five years. It is a sample, a tasting of what is being written in South Africa at the moment. It is neither definitive nor a reflection of what might be termed 'The Best of'. It seeks to reflect breadth and depth in voice and style and preoccupation, rather than comprehensiveness. Inevitably, therefore, there will be gaps, while some poets have also fallen silent (temporarily, I trust).

Crucially, it must be borne in mind that South Africa is a multilingual country; there are eleven official languages. This sample of poetry only reflects work written in English, and it does not feature translations from any of the other official languages. This is a persistent problem in anthologies and collections of South African poetry (including this one), and a significant lacuna, since there are very many important poets writing today in isiXhosa, isiZulu, Xitsonga and Afrikaans, for example. (Denis Hirson's recent anthology, *In the Heat of Shadows: South African Poetry 1996-2013*, attempts to address this by including translations.)

Apart from the limitation of language, the selection also confines itself to work by poets living in South Africa or who have very recently moved outside its borders. Like the restriction imposed by language, this spatial-temporal limitation inevitably leaves out many strong South African poets; poets like Denis Hirson, for example, Rethabile Masilo or Isobel Dixon.

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In conclusion, I am very grateful to Simon Lewis who leapt so eagerly upon the idea for this selection when I suggested it to him. And grateful to his editorial team at *Illuminations*, too, and to the College of Charleston for their support. I also thank the artist, Witty Nyide, for giving me permission to use her work, and the Caversham Centre for Writers and Artists who provided the images.

Clouds are sickled across the sky and seem to cipher
give up hope, all your hope, now!

but they trudge on, finding fresh ways to imagine
that further on there'll be a place

with chairs, or solicitude, or water – somewhere
they may find rest, and be reborn.

(Sole: 'The New Explorers')

Works cited

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